DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 262 SO 021 329

AUTHOR McIntosh, Peggy
TITLE White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies. Working Paper No. 189.
INSTITUTION Wellesley Coll., Mass. Center for Research on Women.
SPONS AGENCY Anna Wilder Phelps Fund, Chicago, IL.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 25p.; Presented at the Virginia Women's Studies Association Conference (Richmond, VA, April, 1986); and the American Educational Research Association Conference (Boston, MA, October, 1986).
AVAILABLE FROM Center for Research on Women, Wellsley College, Wellsey, MA 02181 ($4.00; $1.00 shipping and handling).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Females; Higher Education; *Males; *Racial Discrimination; *Sex Discrimination; *Sex Fairness; *Whites; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

In much the same way that men are not taught to acknowledge all the ways they are privileged in society, whites are not taught to recognize how their status as white people confers on them many privileges. Arguing that male privilege and white privilege are interrelated, and that both types of privilege are unearned and unjustified, this paper begins by reviewing several layers of denial that men have about their privilege and that work to protect, prevent awareness about, and entrench that privilege. The paper goes on to present parallels from one woman's personal experience, with the denials that veil the facts of white privilege. Forty-six ordinary and daily ways in which this one individual experiences having white privilege within her life situation and its particular social and political frameworks, are listed, and ways in which the list applies equally to heterosexual privilege are also pointed out. It is concluded that all the various interlocking oppressions take two forms: an active form which can be seen; and an embedded form which members of the dominant group are taught not to see. To redesign the social system therefore requires acknowledgement of its colossal unseen dimensions. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

MARGARET V. McINTOSH

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 021 329

Through work to bring materials and perspectives from Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged in the curriculum, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. Denials which amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages which men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully recognized, acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon with a life of its own, I realized that since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected, but alive and real in its effects. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. This paper is a partial record of my personal observations, and not a scholarly analysis. It is based on my daily experiences within my particular circumstances.

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible

Copyright © 1988 by Peggy McIntosh, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181

weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.

Since I have had trouble facing white privilege, and describing its results in my life, I saw parallels here with men's reluctance to acknowledge male privilege. Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that women are advantaged to acknowledging that men have unearned advantage, or that unearned privilege has not been good for men's development as human beings, or for society's development, or that privilege systems might ever be challenged and changed.

I will review here several types or layers of denial which I see at work protecting, and preventing awareness about, entrenched male privilege. Then I will draw parallels, from my own experience, with the denials which veil the facts of white privilege. Finally, I will list 46 ordinary and daily ways in which I experience having white privilege, within my life situation and its particular social and political frameworks.

Writing this paper has been difficult, despite warm receptions for the talks on which it is based.[1] For describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen

---

1. This paper was presented at the Virginia Women's Studies Association conference in Richmond in April, 1986 and the American Educational Research Association conference in Boston in October, 1986 and discussed with two groups of participants in the Dodge Seminars for Secondary School Teachers in New York and Boston in the spring of 1987.

or end it?"

The denial of men's overprivileged state takes many forms in discussions of curriculum change work. Some claim that men must be central in the curriculum because they have done most of what is important or distinctive in life or in civilization. Some recognize sexism in the curriculum but deny that it makes male students seem unduly important in life. Others agree that certain individual thinkers are blindly male-oriented but deny that there is any systemic tendency in disciplinary frameworks or epistemology to over-empower men as a group. Those men who do grant that male privilege takes institutionalized and embedded forms are still likely to deny that male hegemony has opened doors for them personally. Virtually all men deny that male overreward alone can explain men's centrality in all the inner sanctums of our most powerful institutions. Moreover, those few who will acknowledge that male privilege systems have over-empowered them usually end up doubting that we could dismantle these privilege systems. They may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society or in the university, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. In curricular terms, this is the point at which they say that they regret they cannot use any of the interesting new scholarship on women because the syllabus is full. When the talk turns to giving men less cultural room, even the most thoughtful and fair-minded of the men I know well tend to reflect, or fall back on, conservative assumptions about the inevitability of present gender relations and distributions of power, calling on precedent or sociobiology and psychobiology to demonstrate that male domination is natural and follows inevitably from evolutionary pressures. Others resort

to arguments from "experience" or religion or social responsibility or wishing and dreaming.

After I realized, through faculty development work in Women's Studies, the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. At the very least, obliviousness of one's privileged state can make a person or group irritating to be with. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence, unable to see that it put me "ahead" in any way, or put my people ahead, overrewarding us and yet also paradoxically damaging us, or that it could or should be changed.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. At school, we were not taught about slavery in any depth; we were not taught to see slaveholders as damaged people. Slaves were seen as the only group at risk of being dehumanized. My schooling followed the pattern which Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow "them" to be more like "us." I think many of us know how obnoxious this attitude can be in men.

After frustration with men who would not recognize male privilege, I

decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. It is crude work, at this stage, but I will give here a list of special circumstances and conditions I experience which I did not earn but which I have been made to feel are mine by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding "normal" person of good will. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my Afro-American co-workers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.

3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which can afford and in which I would want to live.

4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.

11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another woman's voice in a group in which she is the only member of her race.

12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.

13. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.

17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.

18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer

letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.

24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.

25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.

29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost

me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.

30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.

32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.

33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.

34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

36. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.

38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative, or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.

39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.

40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.

42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.

43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.

44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.

45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.

46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me, white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own. These perceptions mean also that my moral condition is not what I had been led to believe. The appearance of being a good citizen rather than a troublemaker comes in large part from having all sorts of doors open automatically because of my color.

A further paralysis of nerve comes from literary silence protecting

privilege. My clearest memories of finding such analysis are in Lillian Smith's unparalleled Killers of the Dream and Margaret Andersen's review of Karen and Mamie Fields' Lemon Swamp. Smith, for example, wrote about walking toward black children on the street and knowing they would step into the gutter; Andersen contrasted the pleasure which she, as a white child, took on summer driving trips to the south with Karen Fields' memories of driving in a a closed car stocked with all necessities lest, in stopping, her black family should suffer "insult, or worse." Adrienne Rich also recognizes and writes about daily experiences of privilege, but in my observation, white women's writing in this area is far more often on systemic racism than on our daily lives as light-skinned women. [2]

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience which I once took for granted, as neutral, normal, and universally available to everybody, just as I once thought of a male-focused curriculum as the neutral or accurate account which can speak for all. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive. Before proposing some more finely-tuned categorization, I will make some observations about the general effects of these conditions on my life and expectations.

In this potpourri of examples, some privileges make me feel at home

---

2. Andersen, Margaret, "Race and the Social Science Curriculum: A Teaching and Learning Discussion." Radical Teacher, November, 1984, pp. 17-20.
Smith, Lillian, Killers of the Dream, New York, 1949.

in the world. Others allow me to escape penalties or dangers which others suffer. Through some, I escape fear, anxiety, or a sense of not being welcome or not being real. Some keep me from having to hide, to be in disguise, to feel sick or crazy, to negotiate each transaction from the position of being an outsider or, within my group, a person who is suspected of having too close links with a dominant culture. Most keep me from having to be angry.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions which were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. I could measure up to the cultural standards and take advantage of the many options I saw around me to make what the culture would call a success of my life. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as "belonging" in major ways, and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely. My life was reflected back to me frequently enough so that I felt, with regard to my race, if not to my sex, like one of the real people.

Whether through the curriculum or in the newspaper, the television, the economic system, or the general look of people in the streets, we received daily signals and indications that my people counted, and that others either didn't exist or must be trying, not very successfully, to be like people of my race. We were given cultural permission not to hear voices of people of other races, or a tepid cultural tolerance for hearing

or acting on such voices. I was also raised not to suffer seriously from anything which darker-skinned people might say about my group, "protected," though perhaps I should more accurately say prohibited, through the habits of my economic class and social group, from living in racially mixed groups or being reflective about interactions between people of differing races.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made inconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color.

For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. Its connotations are too positive to fit the conditions and behaviors which "privilege systems" produce. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned, or conferred by birth or luck. School graduates are reminded they are privileged and urged to use their (enviable) assets well. The word "privilege" carries the connotation of being something everyone must want. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work to systemically overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance, gives permission to control, because of one's race or sex. The kind of privilege which gives license to some people to be, at best, thoughtless and, at worst, murderous should not continue to be referred to as a desirable attribute. Such "privilege" may be widely desired without being in any way beneficial to the whole society.

Moreover, though "privilege" may confer power, it does not confer

moral strength. Those who do not depend on conferred dominance have traits and qualities which may never develop in those who do. Just as Women's Studies courses indicate that women survive their political circumstances to lead lives which hold the human race together, so "under-privileged" people of color who are the world's majority have survived their oppression and lived survivors' lives from which the white global minority can and must learn. In some groups, those dominated have actually become strong through not having all of these unearned advantages, and this gives them a great deal to teach the others. Members of so-called privileged groups can seem foolish, ridiculous, infantile or dangerous by contrast.

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systemically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society and should be considered as the entitlement of everyone. Others, like the privilege not to listen to less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups. Still others, like finding one's staple foods everywhere, may be a function of being a member of a numerical majority in the population. Others have to do with not having to labor under pervasive negative stereotyping and mythology.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages which we can work to spread, to the point where they are not advantages at all but simply part of the normal civic and social fabric, and negative

types of advantage which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the positive "privilege" of belonging, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, fosters development and should not be seen as privilege for a few. It is, let us say, an entitlement which none of us should have to earn; ideally it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. The negative "privilege" which gave me cultural permission not to take darker-skinned Others seriously can be seen as arbitrarily conferred dominance and should not be desirable for anyone. This paper results from a process of coming to see that some of the power which I originally saw as attendant on being a human being in the U.S. consisted in unearned advantage and conferred dominance, as well as other kinds of special circumstance not universally taken for granted.

In writing this paper I have also realized that white identity and status (as well as class identity and status) give me considerable power to choose whether to broach this subject and its trouble. I can pretty well decide whether to disappear and avoid and not listen and escape the dislike I may engender in other people through this essay, or interrupt, take over, dominate, preach, direct, criticize, or control to some extent what goes on in reaction to it. Being white, I am given considerable power to escape many kinds of danger or penalty as well as to choose which risks I want to take.

There is an analogy here, once again, with Women's Studies. Our male colleagues do not have a great deal to lose in supporting Women's Studies, but they do not have a great deal to lose if they oppose it either. They simply have the power to decide whether to commit themselves to more

equitable distributions of power. They will probably feel few penalties whatever choice they make; they do not seem, in any obvious short-term sense, the ones at risk, though they and we are all at risk because of the behaviors which have been rewarded in them.

Through Women's Studies work I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance and if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. We need more down-to-earth writing by people about these taboo subjects. We need more understanding of the ways in which white "privilege" damages white people, for these are not the same ways in which it damages the victimized. Skewed white psyches are an inseparable part of the picture, though I do not want to confuse the kinds of damage done to the holders of special assets and to those who suffer the deficits. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the U.S. think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity. Many men likewise think that Women's Studies does not bear on their own existences because they are not female; they do not see themselves as having gendered identities. Insisting on the universal <u>effects</u> of "privilege" systems, then, becomes one of our chief tasks, and being more explicit about the <u>particular</u> effects in particular contexts is another. Men need to join us in this work.

In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems

at work, we need to similarly examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation. Prof. Marnie Evans suggested to me that in many ways the list I made also applies directly to heterosexual privilege. This is a still more taboo subject than race privilege: the daily ways in which heterosexual privilege makes married persons comfortable or powerful, providing supports, assets, approvals, and rewards to those who live or expect to live in heterosexual pairs. Unpacking that content is still more difficult, owing to the deeper imbeddedness of heterosexual advantage and dominance, and stricter taboos surrounding these.

But to start such an analysis I would put this observation from my own experience: The fact that I live under the same roof with a man triggers all kinds of societal assumptions about my worth, politics, life, and values, and triggers a host of unearned advantages and powers. After recasting many elements from the original list I would add further observations like these:

1. My children do not have to answer questions about why I live with my partner (my husband).
2. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.
3. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit, and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.
4. I can travel alone or with my husband without expecting embarrassment

or hostility in those who deal with us.

5. Most people I meet will see my marital arrangements as an asset to my life or as a favorable comment on my likability, my competence, or my mental health.

6. I can talk about the social events of a weekend without fearing most listeners' reactions.

7. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional, and social.

8. In many contexts, I am seen as "all right" in daily work on women because I do not live chiefly with women.

Difficulties and dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantaging associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage which rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the Combahee River Collective statement of 1977 continues to remind us eloquently.[3]

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as racist because I was taught to recognize

---

[3]. "A Black Feminist Statement," The Combahee River Collective, pp. 13-22 in Hull, Scott, Smith, eds., All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies. The Feminist Press, 1982.

racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth. Likewise, we are taught to think that sexism or heterosexism is carried on only through individual acts of discrimination, meanness, or cruelty toward women, gays, and lesbians, rather than in invisible systems conferring unsought dominance on certain groups. Disapproving of the systems won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes; many men think sexism can be ended by individual changes in daily behavior toward women. But a man's sex provides advantage for him whether or not he approves of the way in which dominance has been conferred on his group. A "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems. To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that <u>systems</u> of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number

of people props up those in power, and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already. Though systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and I imagine for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily-awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

I have appreciated commentary on this paper from the Working Papers Committee of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, from members of the Dodge seminar, and from many individuals, including Margaret Andersen, Sorel Berman, Joanne Braxton, Johnnella Butler, Sandra Dickerson, Marnie Evans, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Sandra Harding, Eleanor Hinton Hoytt, Pauline Houston, Paul Lauter, Joyce Miller, Mary Norris, Gloria Oden, Beverly Smith, and John Walter.

Wellesley College

Center for Research on Women

Wellesley, Massachusetts 02181
(617) 235-0320 EXT. 2500; (617) 431-1453

June 21, 1989

To: Users of the White Privilege and Male Privilege paper for course assignments, classroom discussions, and racism workshops.

From: Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, author of "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" (Center Working Paper #189)

Subject: Notes and Topics for Further Reflection on White Privilege and Male Privilege

In March, 1989, Brenda Montgomery invited me to be on her Chicago radio talk show to discuss this paper. She is an Afro-American woman with an Afro-American audience. She read the list of 46 aspects of privilege aloud on the air, and we spent 70 minutes discussing them and talking with callers, rather than the originally allotted 20 minutes. Response was very positive.

Brenda Montgomery said at one point, "With these attitudes, whites turn into Teflon people. Nothing sticks; it all just rolls off them." I said, "But the thing is, the things on the list are not attitudes. They are not conscious." Listening, later, I began to hear that many black friends use the word "attitude" in a different way than I do. They use it to refer to something deep, generalized, and usually unacknowledged. "She has an attitude." But they also seem sometimes to use it to refer to something they wish the holder would recognize and work on. The difference in usage may come from blacks' cultural experience of dealing with invisible or unconscious racism so much of the time. Joyce Miller of Bryn Mawr College has pointed out to me that two researchers who do work in this area have given the name of "aversive racism" to this kind of deep and unacknowledged feeling which is quite at odds with the holder's conscious attitudes, and which leads to behavior which is quite at odds with a person's conscious intentions and understanding of what she or he is doing. (See References.)

A black woman said she was glad to hear me "working on my own people," because if she said these things about white privilege, she would be seen as militant. Try saying five of these things on the list aloud, imagining that you are a person of color talking about white privilege. Imagine how you would be seen or heard by Caucasian friends or colleagues. Would you be seen and heard as militant? If so, ask yourself whether you have ever formed or created a climate in which a person of color enumerating white privileges can have as much credibility and appear as rationally analytical as a white person doing so. Do you create such a climate?

A black man said that everything on the list was obvious, and that I was

rather naive in thinking that it wasn't. It was obvious to him, but not to me. The list was very hard for me to compile. This situation reminds me of the way in which I assume that white men know they are privileged, whereas they seem oblivious, and we are made to tiptoe around rather than mention in their presences the bald existence of patriarchy, which most of them will go to their graves denying.

When the caller said that the existence of white privilege was obvious, this reminded me also of research which reports that whites think blacks in the U.S. are doing well, while blacks say they are not. Those in a privileged group are educated to oblivion about what it is like for others, especially for others who have to be in their presences. This point may seem obvious, but it is not obvious in the white public domain, and this caller made that clear to me with a new force. What I would add, that he perhaps did not realize, is that a deep politics reinforced by taboos keeps "the obvious" from being seen by those who have been awarded most power in this culture. We are kept ignorant about white privilege and are ignorant about this ignorance.

A black man disagreed with my statement that the privilege of whites is unearned. He said whites earn it through white supremacy. "That's the rules of the game -- white supremacists get it all." A few minutes later, this caller asked me whether I thought some of us (i.e. some of my race) were a little bit less white supremacist than others. His assumption was that all whites are white supremacists.

I do not like this assumption, but I have to take it seriously because it parallels my perception that all white men are "patriarchal" in habits of mind and behavior because of the cultural structures they are born in, though some of them are indeed "less patriarchal than others." "White supremacist" is a label I had associated before only with those who say that white people <u>are</u> superior and <u>should</u> control others. Yet white men who do not explicitly say they are superior, or that they should control women, usually just go ahead and accept whatever unearned public and private power they are given. They seem to me to <u>embody</u> and <u>enact</u> patriarchy, however non-sexist they may seem to themselves to be. I can therefore see how whites can be seen as white supremacist. White women and men can think they are decent, fair, open, "sympathetic," while being seen as white supremacist, unless we have explicitly disowned or worked against inherited racial systems, and the look of superiority which privilege systems allow us. Then we may seem "a little bit less white supremacist" than others.

A black woman who is listed in the Acknowledgments section to the paper says that the list is fine as far as it goes, and that what she experiences beyond the world touched by the list is a whole lot of other suffering I don't have a chance to see. I understand this and urge all readers to add further examples from their observations.

I also urge readers to make their own lists based on their own daily contexts and experiences; this one is specific to my own circumstances, among my friends and colleagues in this particular place and time.

A white male caller said, "Race is not the issue," and told us that he was discriminated against because of his long white beard. "All difference brings

discrimination." The talk show host thanked him and cut him off without much further comment. If you had decided to answer him, what would you have said?

One caller said that the class system was at the heart of the list, and that I was talking chiefly about class privilege. Consider this, in reference to points on my list, or on your own.

A Jewish woman said that she feels that as a Jewish woman she cannot count on many of the elements of privilege which I list. Consider differences between Jewish and Black experience, and similarities.

An editor wrote to me saying that it was useful to have "blunt writing about racism." I wrote back to say that I wasn't exactly doing "blunt writing about racism." Then a white woman in Los Angeles said I had explained "subtle male bias" to her, and this comment, too, disconcerted me. Both comments seem to overlook the elements of unearned privilege, invisibility, and oblivion which I emphasize. Another recent disjunction: a columnist in Los Angeles quoted the part about the "invisible knapsack," but only in reference to male privilege; she omitted all mention of race privilege. Either I have not been clear about what I am saying, or my main points are very hard for these white readers to accept, or both.

A white Jewish male friend said that he thought my list clouded the topic by jumbling together situations in which there is an absence of discrimination with situations in which there is an actual presence of white privilege. No woman of color to whom I have recounted this criticism has granted this difference, nor do I. But I have found it useful to think about his comment, for he is a thoughtful feminist man. As I think about his distinction, and realize I cannot agree to it, this clarifies the subject, and correlates indirectly with the recent Supreme Court decisions which leave a huge burden on individuals to prove they were intentionally and specifically discriminated against. My colleague wants to distinguish between conditions which give specific advantages to whites and those which simply have whiteness as the cultural norm.

A member of the Bird Clan of the Cherokee Nation, Brenda Collins, says that Caucasian women should never say to women of other races, "I know just how you feel." What might Caucasian women do that makes more sense?

The Boston Globe on June 8, 1989 reported that the Massachusetts Board of Regents of Higher Education had voted to "prohibit racism" in the Massachusetts higher education system. But it is not possible to simply "prohibit racism" the way you can, say, "prohibit smoking." Racism is both like an individual's smoke-producing action and like the whole system that produces every kind of air pollution breathed by all of us. How do we go about thinking about and working to change a whole set of systems which produce air pollution? And how do we manage to change understanding of what racism is, to the point where no one thinks you can simply prohibit it? I think we need to say that after all these centuries of white privilege, no one can simply declare white privilege prohibited, starting today. But first, we need public and private awareness that white privilege exists.

A white woman has written to me about the privilege system: "It is very

hard to give up anything once the system is working for you." Yes. But also there are rewards for making good on what we say are our ideals. Within your life circumstances, how can those of you who are reading these questions use power to share power, or use privilege to dismantle privilege systems? Is it possible to arrive at some two or three ways in which each, or all, can see, speak, or act in such ways? and involve their institions in doing so?

Can Caucasian people understand that so-called privilege can be a deficit status? I have a black friend who said to me once, "I wouldn't want to be white if you paid me five million dollars." Can whites learn to understand that they are not "models"?

Can white Americans learn that their versions of things are not international models? One listener has suggested that we should make lists like this about "the ugly American," living off unearned colonizers' power. We are not the only ones who do this, nor do we do it in all situations, but the comparison is valid.

Many groups traditionally committed to "service" have requested permission to use this paper: church groups, the Junior League, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Church councils include Episcopal, Quaker, Unitarian-Universalist, and Lutheran. I think certain white people who had thought of themselves as "good" are able to be more reflective about the conditions surrounding their apparent virtue if they look at this kind of list.

But also the list has been useful to black students in the classes of Prof. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, who uses the paper in a sophomore course, at traditionally black Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Sheftall reports that paradoxically, discussion of the points on my list brings many black students to their first understanding of what their parents and grandparents had been talking about as "institutionalized racism." Many of these students entered Spelman College saying, as so many 17 year-old white female students say, "I've never been discriminated against."

This account and analysis of privilege, then, is useful both for those whose groups have been given permission to dominate, and those whose groups have not been given such permission.

I would welcome responses and further comment from readers of this paper.

REFERENCES

Gaertner, S. L. & Dovidio, J.F. (1981) "Racism among the well-intentioned." In E.G. Clausen & B.J. Bermingham (Eds.), Pluralism, Racism, and Public Policy: The Search for Equality, (pp. 208-222). Boston: G.K. Hall.

Gaertner, S.L. & Dovidio, J.F. (1986) "The Aversive Form of Racism." In J.F. Dovidio & S.L. Gaertner (Eds.), Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism, (pp. 61-89) Orlando, FL: Academic Press, Inc.